

MEETING REPORT NO. 10

PROJECT: **Town of Needham Downtown Study**

DATE: 04 April 2007

LOCATION: Media Center, Town Hall

PRESENT: Downtown Study Committee (DSC)

Kate Fitzpatrick	Town Manager
Jack Cogswell	Chairman, Board of Selectmen
Bob Smart	Cochair, Planning Board
Moe Handel	Cochair, Planning Board
Lee Newman	Planning Director
Nicole Bourassa	Assistant Planner
Joyce Moss	Economic Development Officer
Mark Gluesing	Design Review Board
Paul Good	Chair, Needham Community Revitalization Committee
Jeanne McKnight	League of Women Voters
Bob Hentschel	Property Owner
Peter Friedenberg	Citizen at Large

Communities Opportunities Group (COG)

Judi Barrett

BETA Group (BETA)

Kien Ho

DiNisco Design Partnership (DDP)

Kenneth DiNisco
Jon Oxman

1. PURPOSE

1.1. The purpose of this meeting was to review the Study Area Existing Conditions.

2. PRESENTATION BY JUDI BARRETT

2.1. Consultant team member Judi Barrett gave a presentation on existing zoning, land use, economic characteristics, and development capacity. See attached presentation for added detail to the discussion below.

2.2. Land Use – Land Use was presented in two ways:

- Parcel size & use classification by the assessor's office (Parcels by Land Use Map).
- Building floor area and classification of tenants occupying space collected in a field survey inventory of tenants by the Planning Department (Mix of Establishments Map).

The dominant use is retail and offices (45%). Public use is 20%. Those buildings without one dominant use have been classified as Mixed Use. There is more Personal Services and Professional Business Services use than is indicated on the map because these uses are often in a building without a dominant use that are classified on the map as Mixed Use.

2.3. Intensity of Use – The Study Area consists of fairly low-intensity development. The average Floor Area Ratio (FAR) is 0.673. This is representative of predominant single story buildings.

2.4. Maximum FAR Under Current Zoning – Maximum FAR allowed under current zoning is 1.00 for the Center Business District and 0.70 for Chestnut Street Business District. The Highland Avenue Business District has no specified FAR restriction, but other dimensional regulations give it an effective FAR of 0.75.

The effect of off-street parking and height limits further reduce the actual FAR that is achievable in all three Sub-Study Areas.

2.5. Development Capacity – Evaluation of Development Capacity was evaluated in the several ways including the following:

- Properties with 50% or more of their allowed FAR are unlikely to be further developed because there would not be the needed return on required investment. 75% of parcels are above this 50% threshold and thus unlikely to be further developed.
- The FAR required to provide adequate return on the investment to redevelop was determined assuming that the redeveloped property would have to be worth three times the existing market value. FAR was then calculated based on the amount of additional space required to provide this value. Most properties would need FAR above those allowed under current zoning to provide adequate return. It is important to note that the actual mix of uses will directly impact the amount of space required for an adequate return, because the use drives the value of the property.

2.6. Policy Questions – This analysis shows that existing zoning is an impediment to additional development and raises the following questions:

- What is the responsibility of the Town to facilitate additional development?
- To what extent are local regulations a barrier to reinvestment?
- Can zoning changes alone facilitate redevelopment and reuse?

- 2.7. GIS Data – In the course of preparing this analysis several issues were identified with regard to the GIS data used. For example Gross Floor Area (GFA) was not consistently provided. For the purpose of FAR calculations Net Leaseable Area was multiplied by a grossing factor of 1.30 to come up with the Gross Floor Area.

3. PRESENTATION BY KIEN HO

- 3.1. Consultant team member Kien Ho gave a presentation on existing traffic and parking. See attached presentation.
- 3.2. Average Daily Traffic Volume – New traffic counts were conducted because the most recent ones were done in 2000. A comparison of key locations between the 2000 and 2007 data showed there was little change or a net reduction when totaling both directions of traffic. However an exception to this occurred at the Great Plain Avenue near Nehoiden location with an increase 3.5%.

There also was significant change when looking at traffic in one direction. North Bound and West Bound traffic significantly increased from the 2000 counts, ranging from +28% to + 39%. South Bound and East Bound traffic had significant reductions ranging from –9.5% to – 27%. The effect of these changes was to bring the traffic counts in opposite directions at each location closer to balance in each direction in the 2007 counts compared to the 2000 counts.

The results of this analysis are consistent with trends in the last three years of a general reduction in volume. This was also observed in a traffic analysis study recently done in Wellesley by BETA.

The significant imbalance in the 2000 data of traffic volume in opposing directions raised questions of why this occurred. Lee will check with the Engineering Department to see if they have any explanation.

- 3.3. Existing Traffic Operations Conditions – Key intersections were evaluated for the Level Of Service (LOS) for both AM and PM peak conditions:
- Chapel / Great Plain / Chestnut – LOS “F” for both AM and PM. The LOS at this intersection is made worse by outdated signal equipment and its proximity to the train crossing to the West on Great Plain Avenue.
 - Highland / Great Plain / Dedham – LOS “D” for both AM and PM. The LOS at this intersection is made worse by outdated signal equipment and its proximity to Chapel / Great Plain / Chestnut intersection.
 - May / Chapel / Highland – LOS “E” for both AM and PM. Although this is a five-leg intersection, this intersection benefits from newer signal equipment.
- 3.4. Traffic Simulation Model – Kien presented a traffic simulation model that dynamically showed how existing traffic moves through the study area. This model is based on the 2007 traffic counts and actual traffic signal timing. The model helped to visualize existing traffic problems such as excessive cues of cars waiting to turn.

- 3.5. 128 Add-A-Lane Project – It is important to be aware of other factors that can impact traffic Downtown. For example detours during construction of the 128 Add-A-Lane project could impact traffic flows Downtown.
- 3.6. Roundabout – In response to a question regarding the feasibility of a roundabout at the May / Chapel / Highland intersection, Kien said there probably is not adequate room to provide required turning radius. A roundabout also is not as safe an intersection for pedestrians which is a consideration here especially because of the adjacent elementary school.
- 3.7. One-Way Streets Around Town Hall – In response to a question regarding the feasibility of changing the streets to one-way, counterclockwise around Town Hall, Kien said there are advantages and disadvantages. A benefit would be at the intersections because eliminating a direction of travel would eliminate a phase at the traffic signal. A negative impact would be the zigzag path that would be required to go northbound from Chestnut to Highland compared to the straight through path of Chestnut to Chapel. Likewise going southbound on Highland would force traffic to zigzag from to Chapel and back to Highland on Great Plain Avenue.
- 3.8. Improvements to Traffic Operations – In response to a question regarding the feasibility of improving the existing conditions, Kien said it is certainly possible to make improvements. In addition to upgrading the existing traffic signal equipment other improvements to traffic operations need to be further evaluated.
- 3.9. Parking – Existing parking was reviewed based on observations and two Town parking studies: the 2003 study of off street parking and the 2005 study of on street parking. Town owned lots include 461 spaces. See attached presentation for location of lots and a breakout of spaces per lot. By observation both the Eaton Square and Chestnut Street lots were filled to 90% capacity during peak use (Weekdays from 10:00 AM – 2:00 PM).
- 3.10. Structured Parking – Two approaches for funding structured parking were discussed. One method is to set up an off-street parking fund where developers of new projects would contribute to this fund when not possible to provide the required parking on-site. The parking structure in Plymouth was developed using this approach which Judi Barrett worked on. This approach also serves as a zoning compliance tool to provide a consistent means of dealing with parking in the approvals process. A second approach is for a group of property owners to develop in partnership a parking structure. Post Office Square underground parking in Boston and a project in Lowell are examples of this approach. In this approach, The Town could offer zoning incentives.

The cost for structured parking is dependent on approach. The further below grade parking starts, the more expensive it will be. Some general costs / space for different approaches will be provided.

- 3.11. Quantifying Parking Requirements – The amount of parking required is dependent on land use. Based on the land use mix identified in the Conceptual Development Plan, parking requirements will be determined based on established traffic engineering standards.
4. INTERVIEWS WITH REALTOR / DEVELOPERS / PROPERTY OWNERS
- 4.1. Ken DiNisco reported to the DSC regarding a series of interviews held on 02 April 2007 with a realtor and developer / property owners. There are differing views regarding how the downtown should develop, such as what types of housing are most appropriate and even if housing is viable Downtown. It was also noted during some interviews that there is a frustration with the approvals process.
- Another interview is scheduled on 06 April to discuss the Hospital's expansion plans.
5. PROJECT SCHEDULE STATUS
- 5.1. The project schedule status was reviewed identifying those tasks that have been completed and which are in process. See attached Project Schedule Status Chart.
6. NEXT MEETINGS
- 6.1. The DSC will meet in the evening on Wednesday 25 April 2007. Location and exact time to be determined. The agenda for this meeting will include review of preliminary alternatives scenarios.

The discussions of this meeting are recorded as understood by the writer. Please advise the writer of any omissions or corrections.



Jon Oxman AIA
DiNISCO DESIGN

JAO/

cc: DSC
Kenneth DiNisco
Richard Rice

Enclosure: 1. Presentation: Existing Conditions – Zoning, Land Use, Economic Characteristics & Development Capacity (04/04/07)

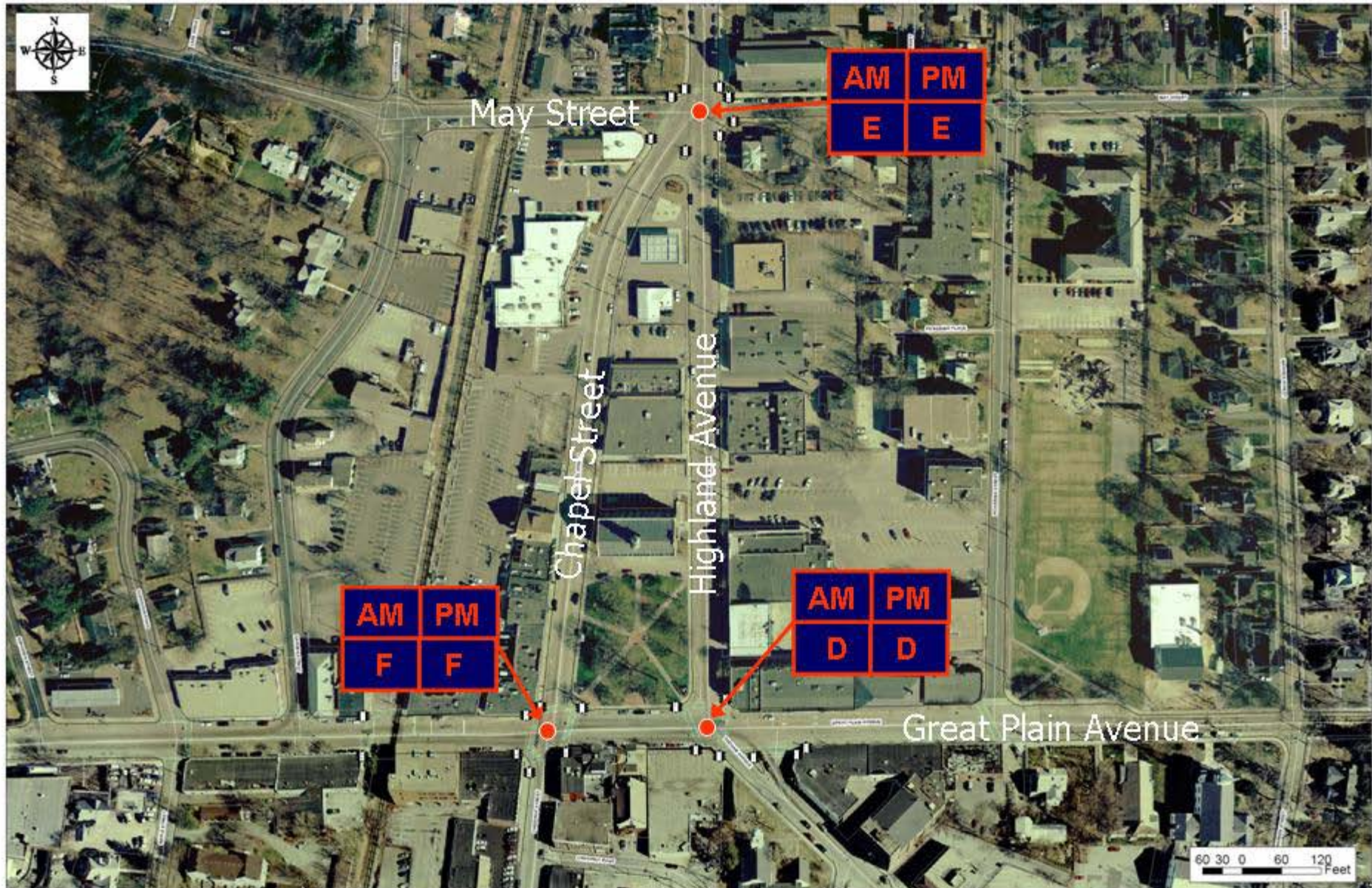
2. Presentation Existing Traffic & Parking Analysis (04/04/07)

3. Schedule Project Schedule Status (04/04/07)

ADT Comparison

	2000			2007			Total % Change		
ATR Location	NB	SB	Total	NB	SB	Total	NB	SB	Total
Chestnut St south of GPA	4,598	8,182	12,780	6,139	6,733	12,872	34 %	-18 %	0.72 %
Dedham Ave south of Lincoln	3,757	5,850	9,607	5,140	4,271	9,411	37 %	-27 %	-2 %
Highland Ave north of May St	5,767	12,023	17,890	8,149	9,136	17,285	39 %	-24 %	-3 %
ATR Location	EB	WB	Total	EB	WB	Total	EB	WB	% Change
GPA near Nehoiden	12,140	6,456	18,596	10,984	8,262	19,246	-9.50 %	+28 %	3.50 %

Existing Traffic Operations Conditions



Needham Master Plan

Existing Public Parking Lots

Downtown Locations

Eaton Square Lot
78 Spaces

Chapel Street Lot
133 Spaces

Dedham Avenue Lot
68 Spaces

Chestnut Street Lot
182 Spaces



NEEDHAM DOWNTOWN STUDY

Existing Conditions:

- Zoning
- Land Use
- Economic Characteristics
- Development Capacity



Draft Report, April 4, 2007

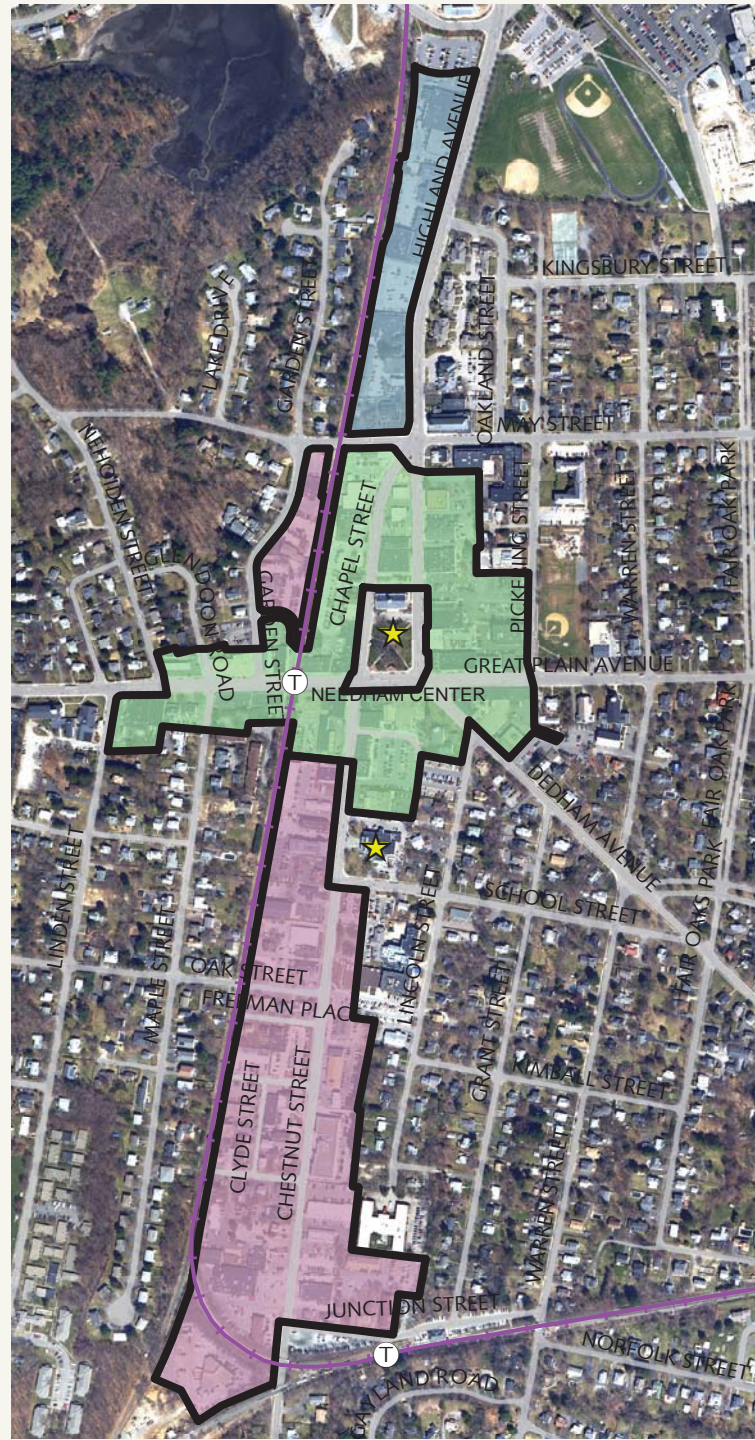
Needham Downtown Plan

Study Area

- Business District (Highland Avenue)
- Center Business District
- Chestnut Street Business District
- Town Hall
- Fire Station


Needham Center Plan

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EXISTING CONDITIONS: STUDY AREA

Legend

 Study Area

USE DISTRICTS

 Business

 Center Business

 Chestnut Street Business

 Town Hall
Public Safety

0 250 500
Feet



SOURCES OF DATA:
Needham Assessor's Office
Needham Planning Department
MassGIS

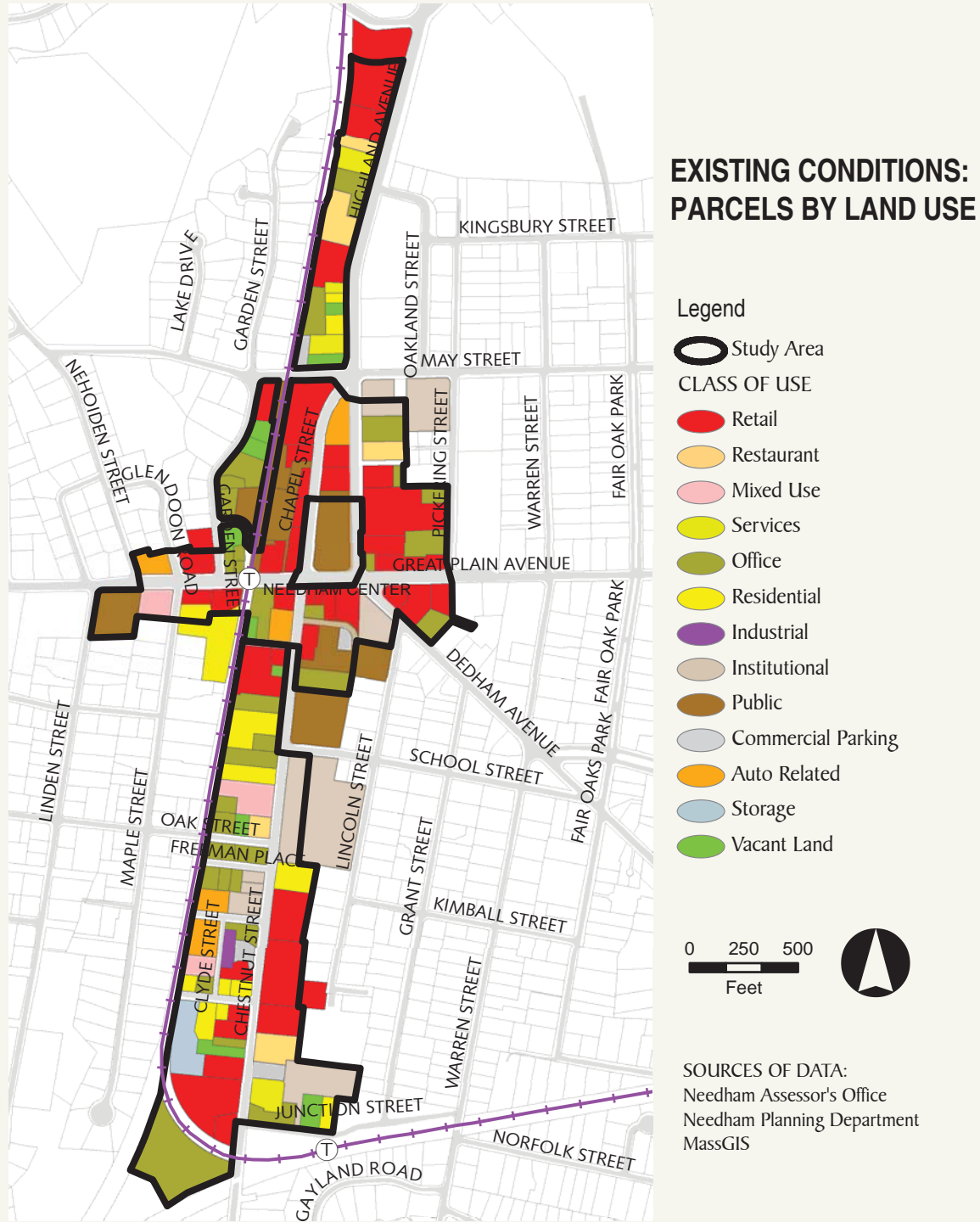
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Uses of Land

- Dominant use of existing parcels: small retail and offices
- Retail development accounts for about 30% of the land and 44% of existing built space
- Office uses account for about 15% of the land and 21% of existing built space

Needham Center Plan

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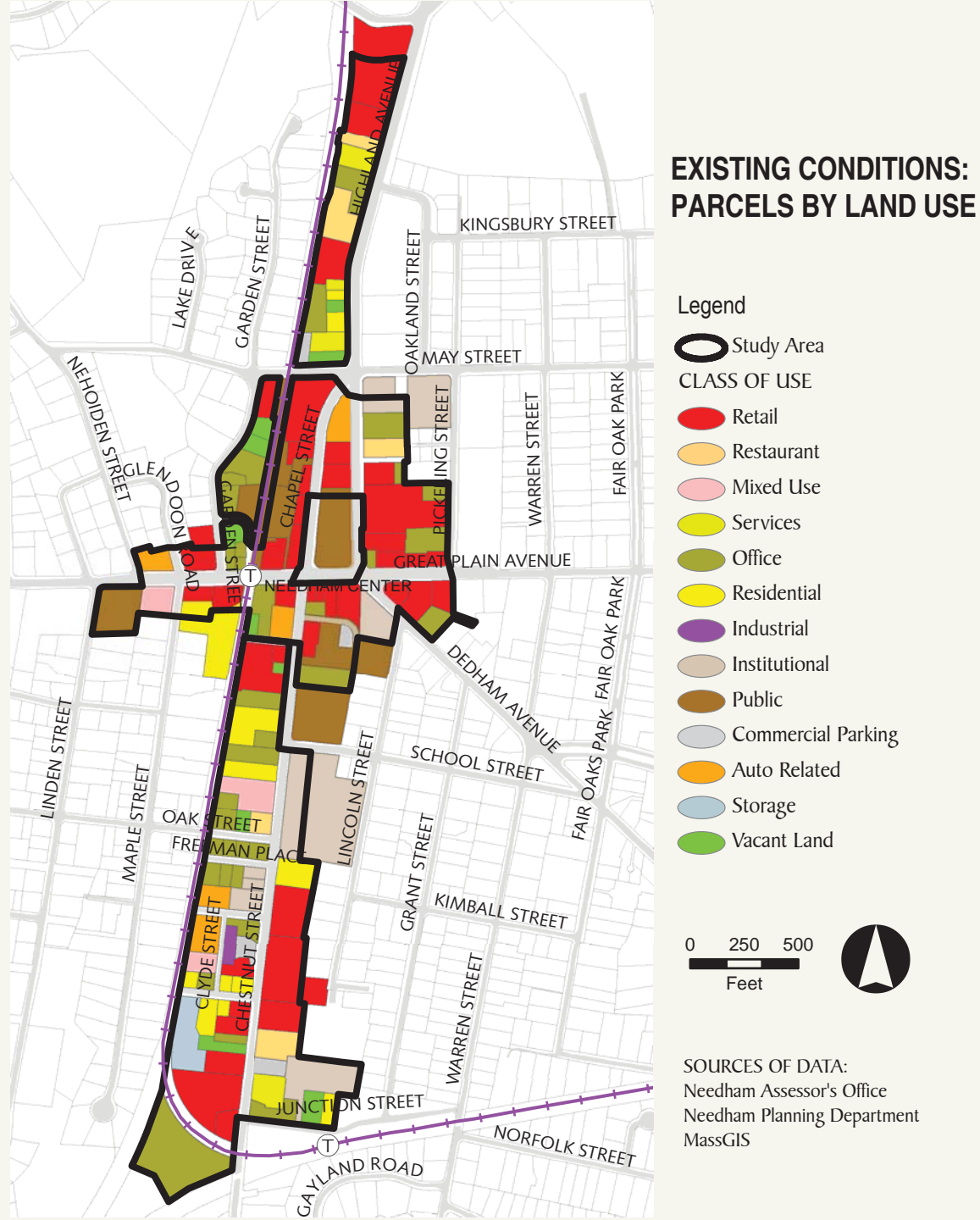
Needham Downtown Plan

Uses of Land

- Public uses (e.g., local government, post office, open space and municipal parking areas) occupy 20% of the land
- Residential uses, about 6%

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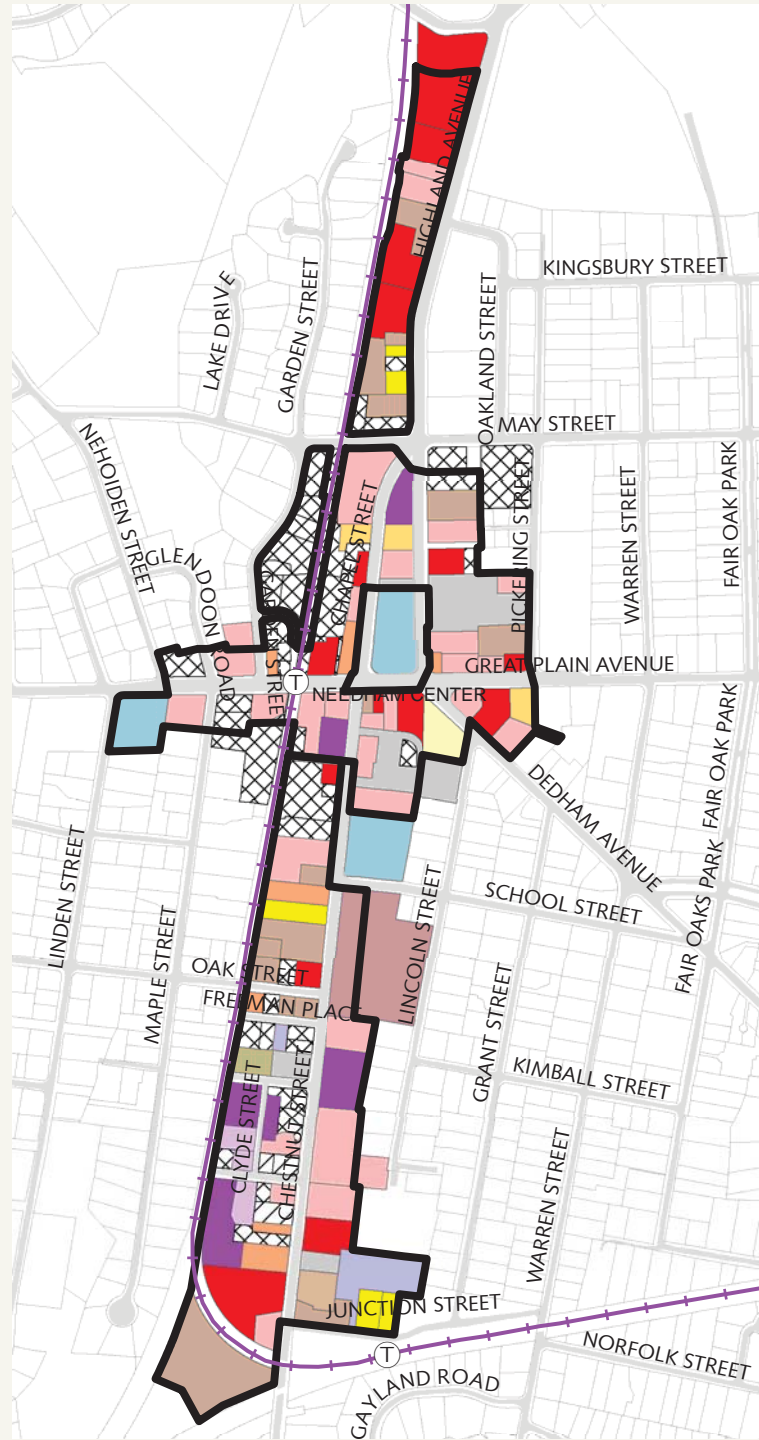
Needham Downtown Plan

Uses of Buildings

- About 48% of the buildings surveyed have a single commercial tenant
- 36% support two to four tenants
- 15% support more than four tenants, including some residential occupants
- Very few vacant commercial units

Needham Center Plan

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EXISTING CONDITIONS Mix of Establishments

Legend

Study Area

PRIMARY USE

- Retail
- Mixed Uses
- Arts
- Auto Related
- Professional, Business Services
- Civic, Charitable
- Construction Trades
- Education
- Government Services
- Finance, Real Estate
- Hospital
- Parking
- Personal Services
- Recreation
- Residential
- Data in Progress
- Join Failure

0 250 500
Feet

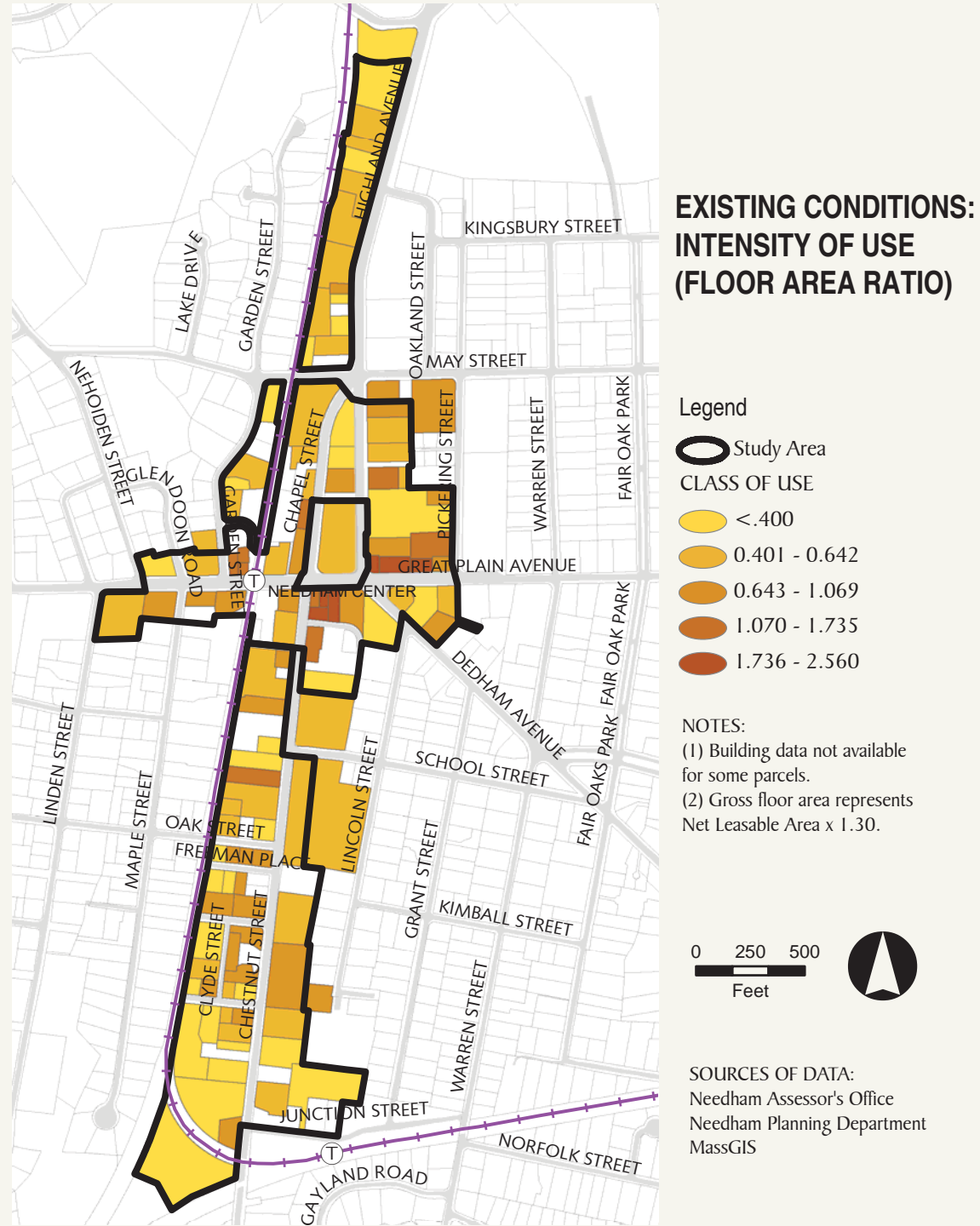


SOURCES OF DATA:
Needham Assessor's Office
Needham Planning Department
MassGIS

Needham Downtown Plan

Intensity of Use

- For the most part, Needham's downtown consists of fairly low-intensity development
- The average floor area ratio for the study area as a whole is about .673, excluding public buildings and a few parcels for which floor area data are unavailable



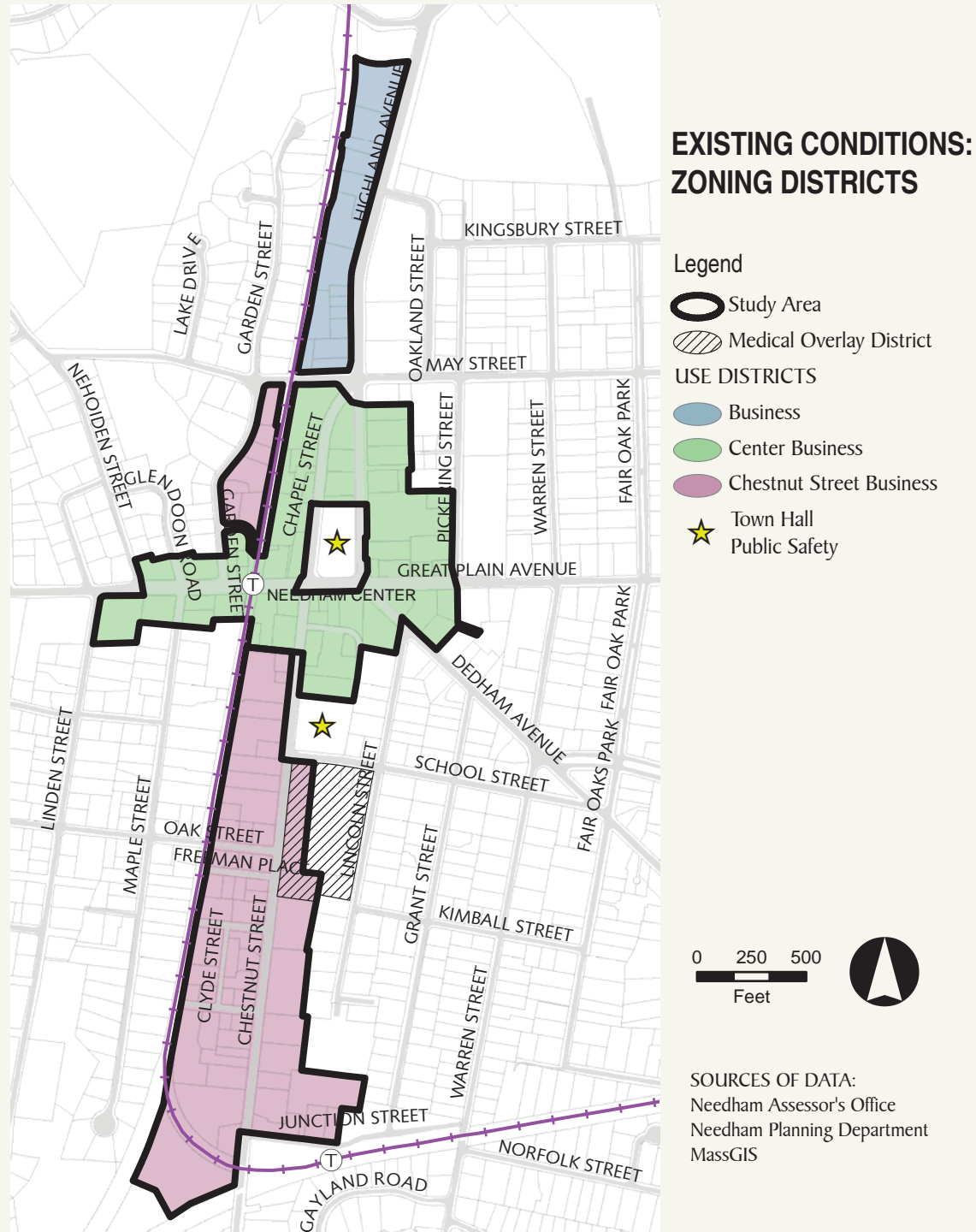
Needham Downtown Plan

Maximum FAR under Current Zoning

- CB: 1.00
- CSB: 0.70
- B: 0.75 (Effective)
- These allowances do not account for off-street parking or limits on the maximum number of stories that can be occupied by business uses

Needham Center Plan

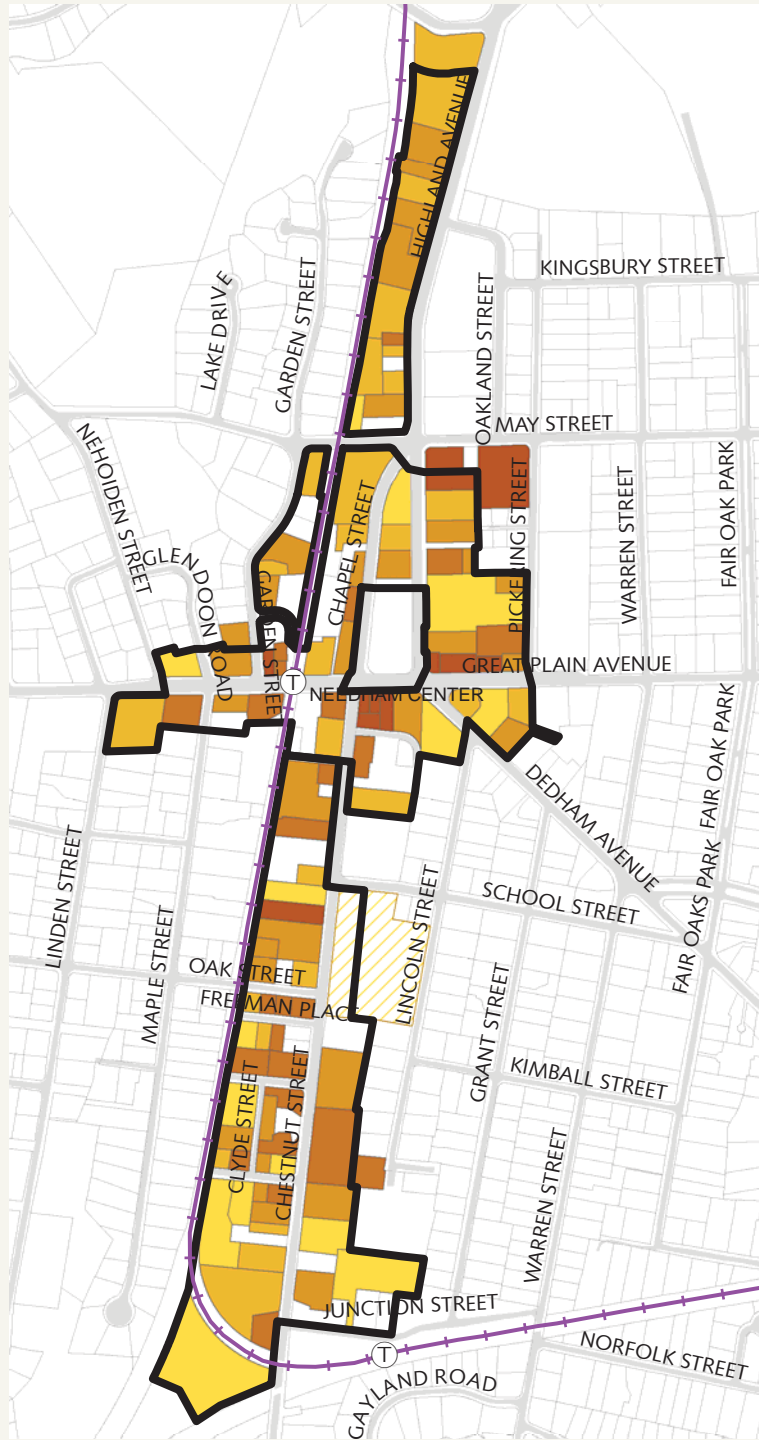
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Needham Downtown Plan

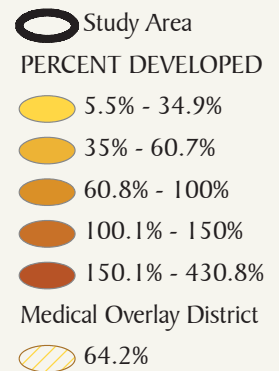
Development Capacity

- Properties already at 50%+ of allowed intensity of use have little room to grow
- This applies to more than 75% of parcels with existing development, excluding public buildings and residential uses



EXISTING CONDITIONS Percent Developed Under Existing Zoning

Legend



NOTES:

(1) Percent > 100% represents properties that already exceed maximum allowable FAR or effective FAR



SOURCES OF DATA:
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Needham Planning Department
MassGIS

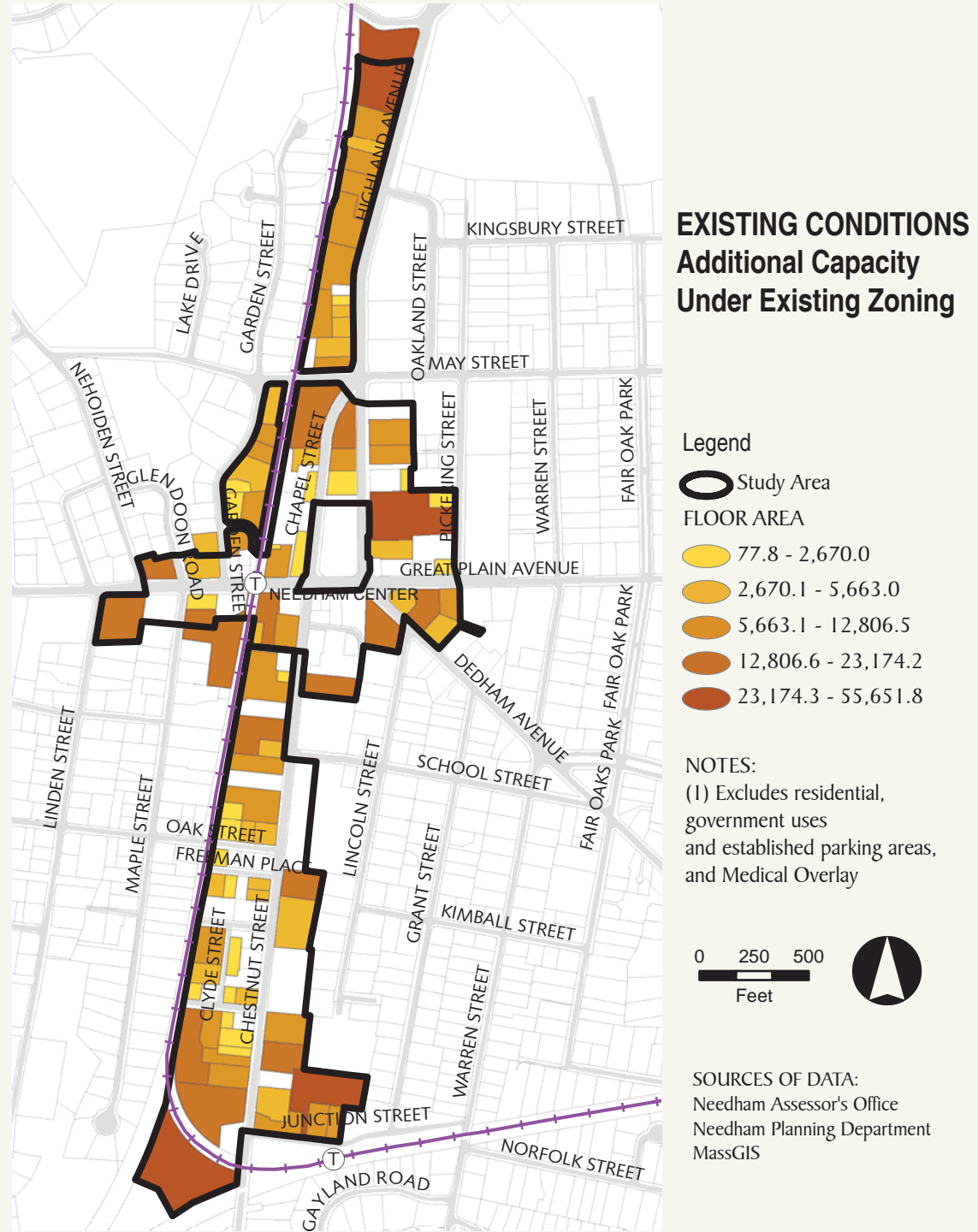
Needham Downtown Plan

Development Capacity

- For properties with any development capacity “in reserve,” the average amount of additional floor area that can be built under existing zoning is 8,000 sq. ft.
- But, the average land required for additional surface parking is 9,800 sq. ft.

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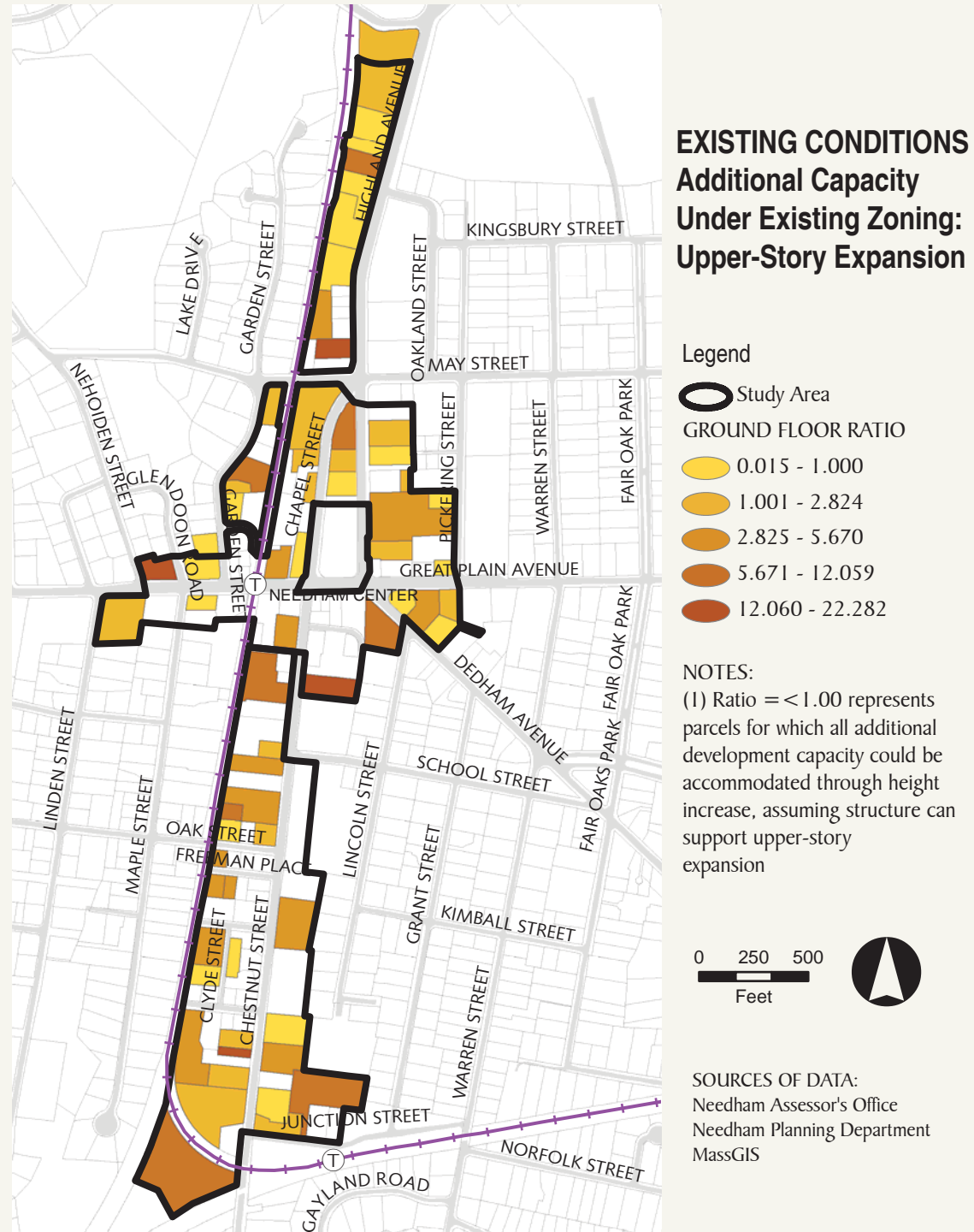
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Development Capacity

- Some properties could “build out” by “building up,” that is, through upper-story expansion
- However, 65% of the existing parcels would have to build up and out in order to achieve the maximum FAR under current zoning
- Accommodating off-street parking difficult if not impossible

Needham Center Plan

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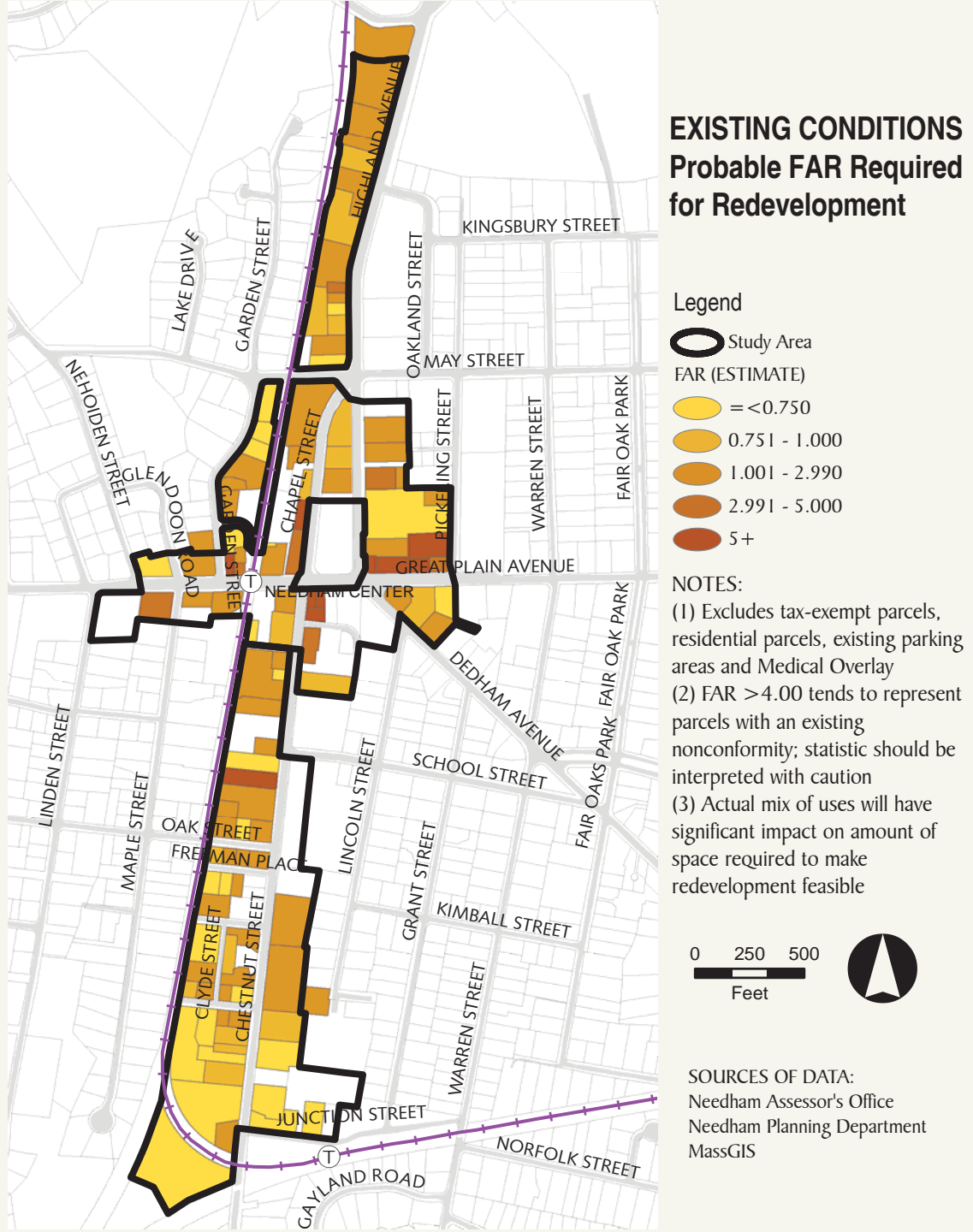
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Development Capacity

- Zoning and parking aside, most properties would need a combination of FAR incentives and parking solutions to redevelop, based on their existing market value
- However, mix of uses will affect the amount of space required to entice new investment

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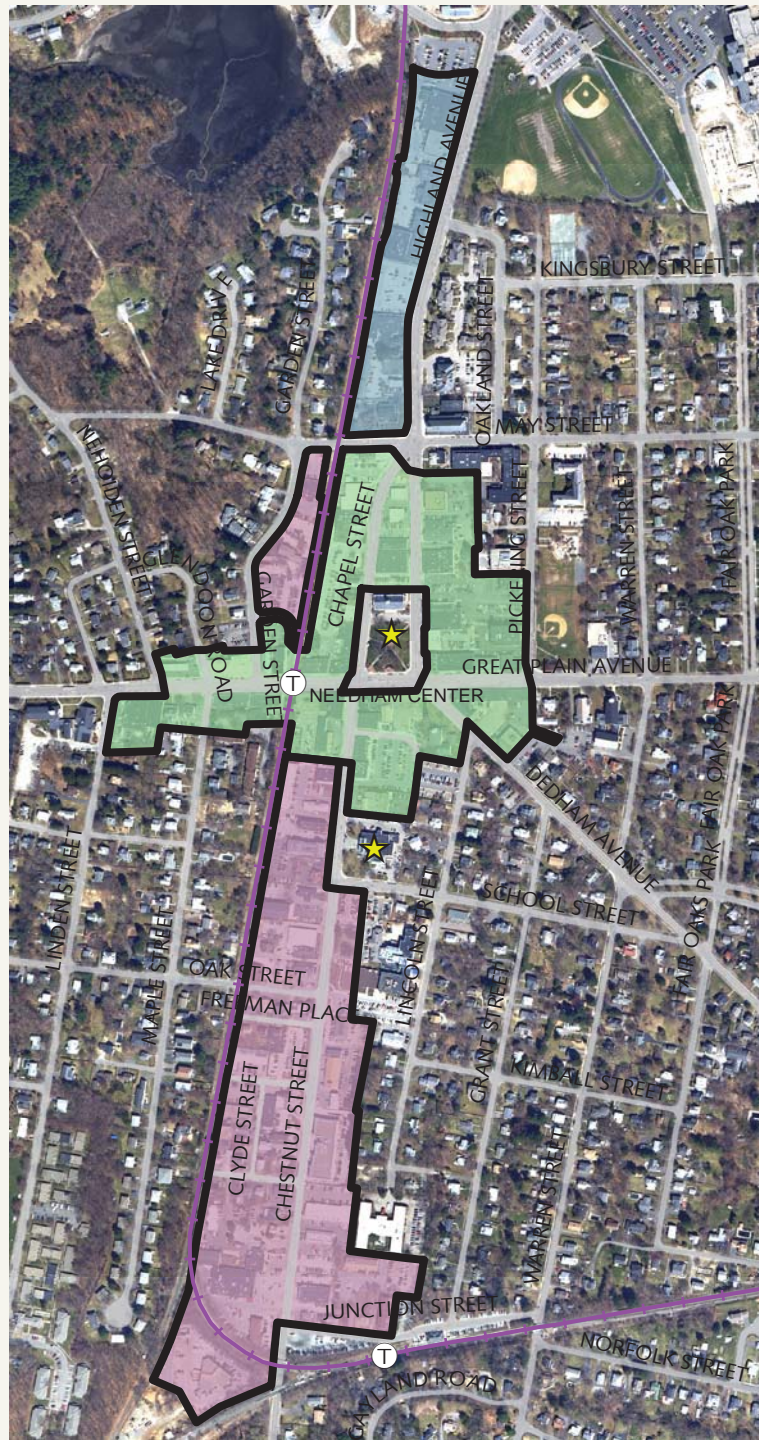
Needham Downtown Plan

Policy Questions

- What is the responsibility of local government to facilitate development?
- To what extent are local regulations a barrier -- or the principal barrier -- to reinvestment?
- Can zoning changes alone facilitate redevelopment and reuse?

Needham Center Plan

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EXISTING CONDITIONS: STUDY AREA

Legend

- Study Area
- USE DISTRICTS
 - Business
 - Center Business
 - Chestnut Street Business
- Town Hall
Public Safety

0 250 500
Feet



SOURCES OF DATA:
Needham Assessor's Office
Needham Planning Department
MassGIS

Project Schedule Status 04 April 2007

Downtown Study
Needham, MA

PROJECT SCHEDULE		Start Date	Finish Date	February	March	April	May	
TOWN MEETING		5/14/07					◆◆	
SPECIAL TOWN MEETING		11/5/07					May 9, 14 & 16	
10 % SURVEY OF EXISTING CONDITIONS		2/21/07	4/8/07					
✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ In Process	Existing Land Use							
	Ownership Patterns							
	Visual Assessment of Building Conditions							
	Traffic, Parking and Streetscape							
	Market Trends							
✓ In Process	Committee Meeting	2/28/07		◆	Wed, Feb 28	AM		
	10% IDENTIFICATION OF COMMUNITY GOALS	2/21/07	2/23/07	■				
	Committee Meeting	4/4/07				◆	Wed, Apr 4	PM Review of Visi
	25% CONCEPT DEVELOPMENT PLAN	3/1/07	5/31/07					
	Three Alternative Scenarios							
In Process	Committee Meeting	4/25/07				◆	Wed, Apr 25	PM Re
	Guidelines for Mixed-Use, Downtown District							
	Traffic, Parking & Streetscape Improvements							
	Zoning Plan							
	Economic Development Implementation							
	Draft Plan to Committee	5/16/07					◆	Wed, May
	Committee Meeting	5/23/07					◆	Wed, I
	Committee Meeting	6/6/07						◀
Community Workshop		6/18/07						